



## Editorial

# The Implementation of Educational Reforms and Changing Classroom Practices

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## Editorial

One of the hallmarks of the *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education (NJCIE)* is how local understandings of policies and practices in education can bring to light the trends, effects, and influences that exist in different contexts globally. Combined, the 11 papers in this special issue, 9(4), provide



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evidence of the diversity for which *NJCIE* is known. The papers reflect different educational traditions, cultures, and school subjects. Through their unique voices and perspectives, each brings us forward in our understanding of educational reforms.

The implementation of educational reforms plays an important role in shaping the dynamics of changing classroom practices and ensuring that educational systems remain responsive to societal needs. Moreover, teachers play a key role in the implementation and success of educational reforms (Datnow, 2020; Vähäsantanen, 2015). The interplay between implementation of new reforms and enactment is therefore a central educational concern (Brevik et al., 2023; Priestley et al., 2021). Across the Nordic region and beyond, policy makers have over time introduced wide-ranging educational reforms aimed at enhancing curriculum quality, teaching practices, student engagement and equity, and overall educational outcomes.

In spite of the well-intentioned objectives of educational reforms, there is a need to further explore and understand their impact on classroom teaching and the complexities surrounding their implementation. There is also a need to compare reform implementations over time, both across reforms and over time since a new reform was introduced (Acedo, 2012; Brevik et al., 2023; McLure, 2023). To address this gap, in our 2024 call for papers for this special issue, we sought papers that would explore how recent educational reforms are being implemented in different contexts and how they translate into classroom practices. The call for papers explicitly sought examples from different school subjects, at different levels and in different educational contexts. By adopting a comparative perspective, we invited researchers to nuance the ways in which reforms impact both teaching and learning in different settings.

This special issue was originally proposed by the EDUCATE research team at the University of Oslo, Norway. The team consists of 18 researchers and disciplinary experts, commissioned by the Directorate of Education and Training in Norway to evaluate parts of the implementation of the new educational reform in Norway. This special issue contains in-depth studies written by various experts on reform implementation in Nordic countries, but it also brings in important reform perspectives from East Africa.

Comparison serves as a methodological perspective in all the papers and is important for exploring the specificities of reform implementation in diverse national contexts (Bray et al., 2014; Karseth & Wahlström, 2022; Sivesind & Karseth, 2022), thus uncovering good practices as well as shared challenges (Cook et al., 2014; Powell, 2020). Research studies that compare reform implementations across disciplines reveal whether certain school subjects are more amenable to reform-driven changes, any noticeable challenges in implementing reforms in the classroom, and whether the intentions of a reform are observable as changes in classroom practices. Furthermore, comparative analyses of different reforms or across time offer insights into the agency of teachers in reform enactment, what works, what is challenging, and why certain reforms

succeed whereas others are less successful. Within the field of comparative and international education, successful reform implementation is particularly important.

This special issue contains eight papers from Norway, one from across the Nordic countries and two from East Africa. The 11 papers deal with different levels of the education system from primary school (Burner & Schipor, 2025; Marino & Ssentanda 2025), to lower secondary school (Aashamar & Mathé, 2025; Skarpaas & Dodou, 2025; Stovner & Hatlevik, 2025;), to upper secondary school, both general and vocational programmes (Aashamar & Mathé, 2025; Isaksen & Gudmundsdottir, 2025; Hartvigsen, 2025; Siljan, 2025; Stovner & Hatlevik, 2025) and teacher education (Yosief et al., 2025) as well as a range of school subjects, such as English, Foreign Languages, Mathematics, Norwegian, Religion and Ethics, and Social Sciences. Further, the mapping study by Magnusson and Doetjes (2025) includes studies corresponding to primary school, secondary school, and teacher education in several language subjects.

## Comparative and international analysis

Consistent with the special issue's emphasis on how local understandings of reform implementation can bring to light comparative trends that exist in different contexts globally, all 11 articles use comparative analysis drawn from practice in particular classes, subjects, or programmes. The studies draw on combinations of classroom observations, teacher interviews and literature review. Of particular interest in this special issue are researchers' attention to the contributions of the studies to the analysis of reform implementation, policy dynamics, and the field of comparative and international education. This is particularly important to highlight as most of the papers are based in the Nordic region.

Still, Volmari's (2025) study of Nordic school reforms (in Finland, Iceland, and Norway) provides a critical contribution by exploring how global policy discourses and national ambitions are woven together. The study reveals that globalisation is a co-produced process, where nationally appointed experts act as "policy translators" who mediate between global and national arenas. Thus, Volmari reminds us of the danger of fallacy of methodological nationalism as well as the fallacy of methodological globalism.

Moving to Uganda in Marino and Ssentanda's (2025) study, the authors illustrate how global reform initiatives (such as donor-funded, structured pedagogies for early reading) do not always coincide with local realities and showcase the limitations of such interventions. Their work highlights how educational reforms can play out differently when they are implemented across contexts in the same country, as is the case for the Acholi- and Luganda-dominated regions of Uganda. Further, they investigate how teachers in urban areas experience a conflict between curriculum design (e.g., low-risk assessment in the mother tongue) and the strong influence of commercial, high-stakes exams (primarily conducted in English), which serve as a key factor for access to secondary school. In that way, the study explores how the teachers in Uganda must

negotiate the linguistic realities in their classrooms.

Yosief et al.'s (2025) study from Eritrea, on the use of Collaborative Action Research (CAR) in teacher education and schools, contributes to the international discussion on teacher professionalism and reforms. Their findings provide an empirical basis to assert that CAR serves as a valuable strategy for enhancing (future) teachers' ability to think, act, understand, and express the realities that affect classroom practice. Their study points to the necessity of connecting teacher education programmes and schools more closely to eliminate fragmentation and isolation, which is a well known challenge for many education systems.

In contrast to these studies, the studies from Norway contribute to the field of comparative education beyond a traditional country-to-country comparison (Bray et al., 1995). Several of these studies provide a contextual understanding of internationally relevant educational concepts, such as deep learning, life skills education, inquiry-based education, digital competence, and digital life skills.

Burner and Schipor (2025) demonstrate how a central concept like deep learning, despite having an official definition from the education authorities, is primarily conceptualised based on scientific definitions (such as meaningful learning vs. superficial learning) and local practices (interdisciplinary, formative assessment). This comparative perspective underscores how the implementation of key policy concepts at the micro (classroom) level is an interpretive process, not a mere transfer from a macro (policy) level. The study explicitly calls for similar studies in other subjects and across national contexts.

The mapping study of *life skills education* in language subjects (Magnusson & Doetjes, 2025) offers an overview of international classroom practices from various countries and contributes to the discussion on how the concept of life skills education can be implemented within a Norwegian classroom context. Furthermore, their study identifies empowerment as the most prominent theoretical term in international research on life skills education in language subjects such as Norwegian, English, and foreign languages, indicating a strong emphasis on student-centred teaching. The study also highlights the importance of valuing students' linguistic and cultural background as well as their personal narratives to promote empowerment and well-being in the classroom.

The concept of *inquiry-based education* is examined in four of the studies from Norway, and how it is implemented in Norwegian language arts (Siljan, 2025), religion and ethics (Hartvigsen, 2025), social science (Aashamar & Mathé, 2025), and mathematics (Stovner & Hatlevik, 2025). Stovner and Hatlevik's (2025) study investigates teachers in Norwegian lower and upper secondary schools and their use of digital technology in mathematical exploration. Through an analysis of video-observed mathematics lessons, they found a connection between advanced use of digital technology and higher levels of mathematical exploration and that digital technology improved the consolidation phase of mathematical inquiry. Siljan

(2025) offers yet another comparative perspective on three literary conversations in the Norwegian language arts and defines the study design as comparative with a local focus, where different student groups' analytical exploration processes are compared across classes in the same year level and contributes to nuanced understandings of the notion of group discussions. The study using data from Religion and Ethics classes (Hartvigsen, 2025) investigates the use of templates and their use to support students' exploration and comparison of different religious traditions. The study illustrates how teachers navigate the tension between international academic frameworks, such as the World Religions Paradigm and Jackson's interpretive approach in their local practices. Through qualitative text analysis and hermeneutic interpretation Hartvigsen (2025) identifies two main cases in their approach. Aashamar and Mathé (2025) found that teachers' conceptualisation of inquiry in social sciences subjects aligns with the academic literature, noting that this finding contrasts with criticisms from other countries about limited inquiry-based learning in the classroom. By using disciplinary comparison, Aashamar and Mathé (2025) compare the implementation of inquiry in two similar yet different subjects: social studies in lower secondary school and social science in upper secondary school. These papers provide empirical insights into how this globally recognised educational principle is implemented in different subjects and following didactic challenges.

Two of the Norwegian studies offer a comparative perspective on *digital competence*. Isaksen and Gudmundsdottir (2025) show how teacher interviews reveal that the new and complex concept of digital life skills is operationalised by teachers into manageable, didactic themes (i.e. digital detox, digital footprints, and digital responsibility). Their findings provide insights into teachers' roles in equipping students with tools to critically and responsibly manage digital content, which is essential for preserving privacy and gatekeeping of students' online identities. The concept of digital life skills is a particularly relevant contribution as they link Norway's concern regarding screen time and mental health with international studies on digital well-being and online resilience. The study notes that there is a limited focus on digital life skills in research from the teachers' perspective, thus providing an important foundation for further comparative research across national borders on the topic. A longitudinal approach is used by Skarpaas and Dodou (2025), who trace the development of digital responsibility over time (from year 8 in 2021–2022 to year 10 in 2023–2024) in English lessons in Norway. Their approach on the topic importantly revealed lack of progression in the teaching and development of digital responsibility in English over time.

Six of the studies employed a qualitative approach, through a scoping review (Magnusson & Doetjes, 2025), using teacher interviews (Isaksen & Gudmundsdottir, 2025) or observations of actual practices in the classroom (Hartvigsen, 2025; Siljan, 2025), or a combination of the latter two (Burner & Schipor, 2025; Marino & Ssentanda, 2025). Another three studies used a mixed methods design where they integrated teacher perspectives through interviews, with video observations of actual practices in the classroom through qualitative and quantitative analysis using observation protocols (Skarpaas & Dodou, 2015; Stovner

& Hatlevik, 2025; Aashamar & Mathé, 2025). The two final studies used multiple qualitative methods (Volmari, 2025; Yosief et al., 2025). This rich methodological approach provides unique insight into the relationship between the perceived curriculum (the teacher's perspective) and the operational curriculum (what is observed in practice). For example, Aashamar and Mathé (2025) found a relatively strong connection between intention and practice, while findings from Skarpaas and Dodou (2025) suggest that digital responsibility may be more present in teacher interviews than in classroom observations.

Overall, the studies in this special issue contribute to the field of comparative and international education by providing a nuanced understanding of a policy journey—from intention at the global and national levels to the complex and often challenging implementation practices in local classrooms. The comparative studies in this issue allow us to examine the interplay between different subjects and contexts and reveal how reforms manifest in diverse classrooms and settings.

Majority of the studies find evidence of key policy concepts being incorporated in classroom practices such as deep learning, inquiry, life skills, digital competence and literacy. However, a critical area remains absent in the secondary classroom and that is digital responsibility. In an era where artificial intelligence is increasingly integrated into our lives, cultivating digital responsibility should be a global priority in both policy and practice. It is essential that students have the skills to navigate digital technologies both responsibly and critically to foster an education system that is relevant and more equitable in the digital age.

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